



Islam and Secularism as a Challenge to Wider Europe: A Balkan Policy Perspective

by Simeon Evstatiev¹

The re-emergence of Islam into the public sphere is occurring not only in places with Muslim majorities such as in the Middle East and North Africa but also among the large Muslim minorities in Europe and America. In the Balkans, as elsewhere, Muslims are turning Islam into a significant public and political force. Whilst "religion is obviously central to the political life of peoples around the world, not simply to Muslims"² the notion of an "Islamic threat" has been cultivated. Observers speak of the alleged incompatibility of Islam and democracy, of the fanaticism of "Islamic fundamentalists" and of the strong opposition to secularization and modernization within Middle Eastern societies. Furthermore, many still maintain that there is a single monolithic political doctrine of Islam and that this doctrine is incompatible with pluralist democracy, an idea that first developed in the West.³

Islamic actors challenge the domestic politics of various EU countries as well as in many of the EU 'candidates' and 'neighbours'. Both the Muslim majority world and the European Muslim minorities outside the EU are perceived as a major challenge for the Wider Europe Initiative and the new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU's main program to share the benefits of the enlargement with the neighboring Eastern and Southern countries.⁴

Balkan countries are pursuing relations with the EU in several different frameworks. Bulgaria and Romania are well advanced and aim to join the Union in January 2007. Turkey has a different timetable remaining for now between 'candidate' and 'neighbour'. Except for Croatia, which is already a candidate country, the other Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro, including Kosovo, are defined by the EU as 'potential candidate countries'.⁵ These potential future EU members are developing their EU relations within the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Whilst the ENP does not cover any Balkan country, however, Bulgaria and Romania will be involved in its implementation once they become EU members.

There are a variety of perspectives towards the EU within South-East Europe. Apart from the Christians there are significant Muslim communities and for whom, the long-standing cultural links with the Muslim majority in Turkey and the Arab world, world are becoming increasingly important in the post-communist period.

Bulgaria is the only EU acceding Balkan country with a substantial Muslim minority (more than 12%). Since the change of regime, Bulgaria's policy towards the Muslim-majority world, and sometimes even to the local Muslim community, has been erratic and virtually non-existent at a conceptual level. Islam is underestimated and often misused in the design of public policy. Public interest has been mainly sensation-based, and stereotyping, and misinterpretation distort the few vague attempts at public discussions.

¹ Simeon Evstatiev is an International Policy Fellow working within the Wider Europe research group. A longer version of this paper will be available in April. For more details, visit the Wider Europe pages at www.policy.hu/themes05/weurope/index.htm

² Eickelman, Dale F. and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 56.

³ See Krämer, Gudrun. "Islamist Notions of Democracy." *Political Islam*, edited by J. Benin and Joe Stork. Pp. 71-82. Berkley, Los Angeles University of California Press. 1997, p. 71.

⁴ See Michael Emerson. "The Wider Europe Matrix", Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, January, 2004.

⁵ <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/candidate.htm>

The basic argument of this paper is that policy analysis and design should not simply rely on the modernist secularist strategy that saw religion as a problem. This "classical" approach was to avoid religion's conflictual terrain by setting it outside the public sphere. Yet, the undoubted quest for cultural authenticity within Islam today requires an adequate response, including within the ENP. The future success of the European project depends to a considerable degree on the re-conceptualization of cultural factors in the design of the neighbourhood policy, particularly as far as the Islamic factor is concerned. Given the strong relationship between religious identity and political and social peace in the Balkans, the argument here is that it is extremely important to study the impact of the Islamic and Islamist movements on the Balkan Muslim communities. There is an urgent need to search for new strategies, to re-think the role of Islam and its potential for collaboration in dealing with the more trenchant problems of domestic and international affairs.

This discussion paper aims to contribute to these debates by suggesting directions for inter-disciplinary research on Islam and Muslim identity in the public sphere, particularly in the Balkans but also in the Middle East and within the EU's 'neighbourhood' project. Attention should be given to the capacity of Muslim publics to overcome the broader cultural divide between "Islam" and the "West", in this regard, exploring the Bulgarian, and more generally the Balkan, model for interethnic and interfaith coexistence in the ENP context can make an important contribution. Thirdly, how can Islam play a role in the design and implementation of the ENP in the Balkans, and particularly with Bulgaria as an EU member?

The general question is how Muslim values and practices can fit within the European project? Can desecularization proceed without a reversal of modernization and the creation of identity conflicts which in turn may spawn extremist attitudes? It seems hardly possible to study the interactions between European institutions and Muslim countries adjacent to Europe without taking into account cultural differences. For various reasons, the cleavage between Christianity and Islam does coincide with comprehensive differences in ways of life. For example, a key concept to understand current issues involving Islam is the idea of the public sphere. In western Europe, this is an idea closely associated with the German social theorist, Jürgen Habermas and his idea of the "rationality potential" of communicative action.

Habermas follows Immanuel Kant in characterizing the public sphere as "ideally an intermediate space in which ideas are presented in their own merits by self-reflective moral subjects rather than as emanating from authorities such as preachers, judges and rulers. Even for early modern Europe, however, the early Habermas neglected the role of religion in the development and expansion of the public sphere."⁶ Given the salience of religious identity in the preservation and promotion of political and social peace in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe, information about religion needs to be conveyed across groups so as to maximize mutual understanding and minimize stereotyping.

A second key concept for overcoming existing intercultural gaps between Islam and secular European societies is the idea of religion and religiosity. During the fourteen centuries of their mutual history the civilizations of Christianity and Islam created complicated political, economic and intercultural relations. From these two world religions sprung societies which have, on occasion, faced encounters which evolved into military conflicts under the banners of "crusades" or "jihad". Byzantine sources mentioned the first encounter with the Muslims as a border battle with followers of a "false prophet". From a theological perspective, the first evaluation of Islam was similar. In his "Book of Heresies," St. John of Damascus described Islam as a newly emerged "heresy" of the Arian type denying Jesus Christ's consubstantiality with God.

On the doctrinal level Muslims also demonstrated a lack of interest in Christians. The Qur'an categorized Christians as "people of the Book" (ahl al-kitāb) with whom good relations should be maintained. However, Christians were seen as having adulterated the Gospel with many mistakes and misinterpretations. These mutual perceptions characterized relations between Christianity and Islam during the middle ages, although the actual features of "the true face" of each of the two religions remained hidden to "the Other".

The Christian and Muslim worlds entered the Modern Era burdened with mutual prejudice. The West saw the political and economic backwardness of the "realm of Islam" (dār al-islām), in particular, the decline of the

⁶ Eickelman, Dale F. and Armando Salvatore, "Muslim Publics", Public Islam and the Common Good, Eds. D. Eickelman and A. Salvatore, Brill: Leiden, Boston. 2004.

Ottoman Empire, as an occasion for its colonial "civilizing mission." In turn, the religious, social and cultural elite of the Muslim world responded with actions that had far-reaching effects. In the nineteenth century, prominent Muslim thinkers sought to adapt Islam to modern reality, beginning a reform process that continues to date. Reform has comprised a dynamic combination of modernization and a revival of faith and return to its basic texts: the Qur'an (the Word of God) and the Prophetic Sunna (the Holy Tradition of Islam). In this process, one sees almost all reformers (aside from the secularized modernists) continuing to draw on basic texts and teachings. This can be compared to the Christian tradition and Martin Luther and his call for a return to the foundation of the Gospel and a purification of the historical aberrations and misapprehensions within the Catholic Church.

Despite the history of misreading, there was a gradual rectification of Christianity's "medieval misunderstandings" of Islam and Muslims. This was due not only because of social and political developments during the colonial and decolonial ages, it was also a consequence of developments in the humanities, especially in Arabic and Islamic Studies. Introduced in some European universities as early as the 16th or 17th century,⁷ "the academic project was very often closely linked to the imperial."⁸ Some orientalists, like Louis Massignon and his follower Henri Corbin, gradually came to be convinced that Islam, like Christianity, was a great religion of Revelation with a deep mystic spirit, underlying one of the most significant civilizations. Other orientalists such as Hamilton Gibb, eagerly defended the merits of Islamic orthodoxy. Although Edward Said criticized both types for "essentialising Islam"⁹ they gradually convinced some in the West that, with respect to spirituality, Islam was also a path to religious salvation. In the eyes of Christians, Muslims' search for religious truth became increasingly legitimate, and in consequence, so to did their religious identity. In other words, the conclusions of scholars were not confined to universities but brought about a slow but persistent change in the attitude of Western Christianity towards Islam.

This progress in official dialogue acted as the catalyst for a series of initiatives, meetings and resolutions. One such was the 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* which invited Muslims to meetings dealing with various concerns, including "Meaning and Levels of Revelation," "The Concept of Monotheism in Islam and Christianity" and "Common Humanitarian Ideals for Muslims and Christians." Thus Western Christianity gradually managed to push to the fore not merely toleration of Islam, but also real consideration and respect for "the other" – his religious identity and tradition.

Can such historical examples be applied to current realities with regard to the recent debates and challenges involving Islam? Is the European notion of secularism still relevant to contemporary realities, including the demographic ones? Is the modernization of Muslims possible only by emancipation from Islam or there is a way to achieve modernization without to abandon religion? We can examine some of these issues in respect of Bulgaria, the country with one of the largest Muslim populations in Europe. The transition of Bulgaria from a totalitarian to a democratic created an expectation that public policy might work to reconcile public interest with social justice. Although governments did guarantee the rights of religious denominations, in general, public policy has largely ignored the challenges related to religion, particularly Islam. This ignorance of Islam as a religion and social practice by Bulgaria's elite and influential policy makers ensures an official ambivalence towards the Muslim minority. We can consider the example of how the government handled the centers of Islamic religious education – an issue that has recently come to the forefront of public policy debate. Not only do governmental bodies such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs not have any updated communication strategies for these Muslim institutions, both the secondary and the higher Islamic schools are chronically under funded. The state claiming an explicitly secular character, refuses to provide any financial support, categorizing religious schools as "private," and thereby denying them access to government support. In turn, this means that religious schools remain relatively isolated from other academic institutions. Furthermore, limited access to international academic cooperation has resulted in Islamic religious schools relying on foreign religious foundations for scholarships and fellowships to study and specialize abroad. This academic

⁷ Collège de France 1587, Leiden 1613, Cambridge 1632, and Oxford 1634.

⁸ Jorgen S. Nielsen, "Orientalism and Anti-Orientalism: Is There a Middle Way?", *Ethnology of Sufi Orders: Theory and Practice*, Proceedings of the British-Bulgarian Workshop on Sufi Orders 19-23 May 2000, Sofia, Ed. Antonina Zhelyazkova and J. Nielsen, International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, Sofia 2001, p. 339.⁹ Current normative value of agricultural lands in Ukraine. It may be higher or lower under conditions of free market.

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 265.

marginalization which has been tacitly “encouraged” by the government, forces these educational institutions to remain independent of local development and international secular cooperation. They have become an object of suspicion in mainstream Bulgarian society – a mistrust that is reinforced by the lack of public access to the educational and research activities of these schools.

What is increasingly important for Bulgaria, and more broadly of Southeast Europe, is the impact of global events related to Islam on the relations between the Muslim community and mainstream society. The central issue is whether conflictual relations on an international level will be internalized into local reality, a situation that could be easily realized within the emerging new religious public sphere. If we take into consideration the traditional secularist approaches that prevail in public policy making towards religious and minority communities, this could be fast becoming a pressing issue.

A typical example of this problem can again be found within the education sector. During the 45 years of communist rule, there was no religious instruction in mainstream Bulgarian schools. It was only in 1997-1998 and 1999-2000 that courses on Christianity and Islam were (respectively) reintroduced. Nevertheless, mainstream public policy still relies upon traditional secularist strategies, which as a rule attempts to avoid religion. This is consistent in the teaching of religion in mainstream (secular) schools even though proper religious instruction could foster a new type of informed understanding adequate to address today's challenges. Religious instruction remains conservative, ethno-centric and dogmatic and religion's basic moral values are represented as exclusive, with little or no attention to interfaith relations, either in an ethical/theological or practical/social sense. Religious education is cut off from broader social and political development and, rather than supporting social integration and building bridges, it perpetuates if not exacerbates divides between Christian and Muslim populations. The influence of religious instruction will increase with time, so it is crucial that it should stop acting as an impediment to inter-religious relations. More academic and intercultural competence should be brought towards curriculum development and instruction.

Conclusion

Conceiving new realities in a constructive way requires that public policy retain ideals of social justice and human rights whilst redefining traditional secularist strategies. There needs to be intensive academic and programmatic work that addresses intercultural relations from a religious perspective, and not only of from the point of view of inter-ethnic coexistence, which has been the case for the last fifteen years. Muslims in Bulgaria and the Balkans as well as Muslims elsewhere in Europe are experiencing a clearly definable though varied process of re-Islamization that seems to be irreversible. There is a conflict between the generations among the Muslim communities in the Balkans – the younger tend to “impose” the model of “classical” Islam while the older prefers the “traditional”, i.e. the inherited from Ottoman times, interpretation of the religious doctrine and practice. Re-Islamization often seems to be accompanied by a de-culturation that leads to a crisis of the national and ethnic identities. Societies and policy makers face the challenge to elaborate a new model of co-existence in which the models inherited in the Balkans with its indigenous Muslim population can be helpful in some aspects also within the EU. Religiosity should not be completely marginalized in public life.